

THE PEOPLE VS. BEN GURION'S GOVERNMENT

The Present Crisis in Israel

JON KIMCHE

THE first time I met Ben Gurion he was studying Greek and reading Thucydides; that was ten years ago. The last time I saw him—in the early summer of 1952—he was living Thucydides. This Athenian comparison is, in fact, the clue to his crisis.

During this past month I have sought to isolate, from a mass of notes, conversations, articles, and impressions, the essence of what has upset so many Jews and a good many of the best Zionists about Israel today; what, in short, was the nature of Israel's crisis? The evidence suggested that it was not the economic emergency; this was serious and contributed largely to the general *malaise* but it was not the main ingredient. I came to the conclusion that it was the moral crisis in all its facets which underlay the economic crisis and was itself the overriding problem: but again this also did not provide a complete answer. It was not until I re-read Thucydides that I think I began to understand the nature of the crisis.

There is, in fact, not just one all-embracing crisis; there are three quite distinct crises: one of the government, one of the people, and—Ben Gurion's. For the sake of simplicity, the first two can be best described as "the case against the government" and "the case for the government." The

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government of Israel is charged by the people with unreliability, indecision, inefficiency, nepotism, and bureaucratic arthritis. And the people of Israel are accused by the government of lacking a sense of civic responsibility, of seeking the fleshpots today rather than building the future, and of, by their daily practices, making good and efficient government virtually impossible.

Both together make up Ben Gurion's crisis. This can be described with Periclean brevity:

"I am the same man; my views are unaltered; it is you who change, since in fact you took my advice while unhurt, and waited for misfortune to repent of it; *and the apparent error of my policy lies in the infirmity of your resolution*, since the suffering that it entails is being felt by everyone among you, while its advantage is still remote and obscure, and, in face of a great and sudden reverse, your mind is too depressed to persevere in your resolves."

This was also the diagnosis made by one of the acutest observers in Israel, a farmer of the Sharon plain who has grown up with the country, a friend and counsellor of the government who has, however, always been independent of it. Earlier this year he was away from Israel for some months, and these were his impressions when he came back: "I am not worried about our survival. What worries me is that I cannot see the idealism, the pioneering spirit, and the unselfishness that were our towers of strength. One feels as if we lived among those who came out of Egypt with Moses with all the familiar complaints."

This was the crisis of Pericles in Athens twenty-five centuries ago; that of Moses in the desert a thousand years before Pericles; and now, in the 20th century, it is Ben Gurion's: a crisis of the government and of

the people. But it is, of course, a wholly different crisis when seen through the eyes of the government, or through those of the general public, whether Israeli at home or Zionist abroad.

AT THE root of the case against the government—and that means the whole complex governing hierarchy ranging from ministers through the government departments to the Jewish Agency and its satellites—is that they have lost the confidence and respect of those whom they govern.

The cabinet is looked upon not as the supreme national authority directing the affairs of the nation, but as a collection of individuals who act as the delegates for the most influential vested interests, which, because of their numerical strength, or because of the accidents of Israel's electoral system, are able to exert their sectional interests in the highest council of the nation. Labor respects only the labor ministers; the religious only the Orthodox; and the opposition—the General Zionists, Mapam, Herut, and the Communists, comprising 300,000 out of 695,000 electors—respect none.

The Knesset, on which not so long ago the nation's intense political interest was focused, now shares in the decline of public esteem for the national institutions. Like the government, the Knesset is not viewed as the incorporation of the nation's will or the sounding board for the free discussion of its problems. It is neither a debating chamber nor the council of state that the British Parliament becomes in periods of emergency. On the contrary, the Knesset has become a platform for the declamation of party attitudes, where speeches are often prepared before the debate and read to an empty house, and where there is no intention either to persuade one's opponents or to be persuaded by sober reasoning. The public has evidenced a healthy sense of discernment by showing its distaste for this pale shadow of parliamentary discussion. Moreover, the calibre of the average Knesset member—with some outstanding exceptions—is not impressive. The voter has no real choice in picking

his representative. He votes for a party list. The actual Knesset representatives of the parties are chosen by the party executives—and qualifications in such selection can easily be left to the imagination of the reader.

Any moral authority which the government wishes to exert has therefore to be earned either by the success of its policy or by the quality of its administration. Fortunately for Israel, this moral authority has to a large extent been achieved by the Foreign Ministry and by the two decisive home departments: the army and the police. These have been protected from politics and saved from having to divide up key posts among the nominees of each of the parties in the coalition. All three were able to build up a sound administration based on competence.

That the police force should have achieved this reputation of probity shows what can be done with proper leadership and guidance. The inspector-general, Yehezkel Sacher, has explained the difficulties of his understaffed, underpaid, and overworked force. His 5,300 men represent probably only about one-third of the actual requirements. They are so overworked that they cannot attend to crime prevention. During political demonstrations they have to spend hours in mediation between the demonstrators and whatever institutions are being demonstrated against. They have to lecture new immigrants on observance of the law—and they must be constantly wary of injuring the religious, social, sectarian, or political susceptibilities of any suspected offender. For all these services and duties, the pay of the police is lamentably poor.

Other departments which are largely exempt from general criticism are the Ministry of Agriculture and Development, which was until last June under Eshkol; the treasury and the agricultural and colonization branch of the Jewish Agency, also under Eshkol; and the absorption department of the Jewish Agency, which has been in the efficient hands of Giroa Josephtal, who modestly rejected the post of Finance Minister following Kaplan's resignation last May.

THESE are the exceptions; the rule is very different. The majority of the government departments have not achieved that moral authority which comes from sound administration, together with the public's recognition that all comers are treated with a strict impartiality. The simple honest citizen who took his place in the queue and waited his turn soon discovered that this led nowhere; if you wanted anything at all you had to "organize" it, you had to make use of any friends you had in official positions. Naturally, those departments that had the most direct dealings with the public were most affected by this practice: the Treasury, the Ministry of Communications, and the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

These three departments were in effect in charge of the physical controls on which the everyday life of the individual and of the trading community was hinged. The administration of a wide range of controls is at the best of times a difficult operation, even in a country with a civil service tradition, such as Great Britain. In Israel there was neither the tradition nor the experience; there was, furthermore, the added difficulty of applying the controls under conditions of acute scarcity, where the slightest misapplication of the ration or the priorities would throw the whole system out of gear. The misapplication was not slight; nor was the disorder that resulted from it.

Thus the food ration was rarely honored on time; the public was forced to hoard by purchase in the black market and by the storing of imported gifts because it was never sure whether the official ration would be available or not. But such was the state of affairs that even when the ration was distributed a substantial portion disappeared from the shops and reappeared in the black market. Prices were controlled for a wide range of consumer goods. But even a perfunctory check-up revealed that, for example, a tailor would sell forty suits a month at the controlled price of forty Israeli pounds and some two hundred at anything from one hundred and twenty to two hundred pounds. Among the customers for the suits at what

were in effect black market prices were respected government officials, party politicians, and others who ought to have set the tone.

The same story can be told of almost every sector of national life. Footwear is strictly rationed and price-controlled. The maximum price of shoes, last May, was eleven Israeli pounds—but you could go into most shops where shoes were available and buy a pair for fourteen Israeli pounds. This was not an overcharge or an under-the-counter transaction. It was quite openly explained: eleven pounds for the shoes and three for the ration points; for the allocation of the latter was quite insufficient for the average family.

And as you rose in the social scale so did the nature of the transgression of the law. The investors from abroad often made the most of their favorable opportunities. One large hotel company imported three times the amount of furniture required for their new building. The surplus went into the local black market. The promoters covered their entire initial outlay on the construction of the hotel from the proceeds of this transaction.

These are a few isolated incidents, but they are typical and they could be multiplied to the point of monotony. In all, there has been created a climate of conduct in which the public barely bothers with the formality of evading the law: the most blatant black market in Tel Aviv was not lurking in some dark and obscure side street but openly carried on in Carmel Market, which radiates from the center of the city's shopping district, and in Lilienblum Street in the very heart of business and banking activity. It was the same in Haifa, and not very different in Jerusalem. The black market was accepted as an auxiliary to the ration; no shame attached to it or to those who frequented it. The eight hundred "Economic Police" officials of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry were incapable of dealing with it.

THIS whole gamut of physical controls over trade and industry, bulk buying and

food rationing, is concentrated in the hands of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry under its Minister, Dov Joseph. It is established in the Palace Hotel in Jerusalem, has a formidable staff of some 3,000 officials, and in the public mind has become almost a law to itself. It does not enjoy a reputation for either efficiency or good relations with the public and perhaps more complaints are addressed to it than to any other sector of the government.

On a different level the Treasury also lost touch with the public. For many months before his death last July, Kaplan, the Finance Minister, had been seriously ailing. Horowitz, the Director-General, was compelled to spend most of his time away from his department, negotiating in London or Washington. He was also far from well. And Naphtali, the Deputy Minister, soon also succumbed to illness. Thus the department which was to control the economy of the state and make the day-to-day decisions affecting both state and business was for months without effective head and without its Director-General. Vacillation, indecision, and unreliability became its hallmark; goods were left lying around for months, projects were delayed and lost because of the incapacity of the Treasury to give a speedy reply to any letter or inquiry.

A typical example which demonstrates the extent of present administrative shortcomings can be seen from statistics of tax collection returns for the first nine months of 1951. Although the relatively poorly paid government employees make up only 7 per cent of the working population, they paid 13 per cent of the total income tax collected. Their tax is deducted at the source. The merchants and industrialists who have reaped the profits of inflation, and the workers in the very highly paid "services," have to a considerable extent escaped the income tax net. As a result of this, together with other factors, there is a steady drift away from essential jobs to the more profitable "Services and Professions."

Twenty-nine per cent of Israel's labor force is in "Services and Professions," as

against 25 per cent of the United Kingdom's labor force, and 23 per cent of that of the United States.

FROM the beginning, the Israeli government offered little inducement to men of quality to join the government service. Pay was poor—the ratio between the highest and lowest paid job is $2\frac{1}{2} : 1$, as compared with a ratio of $12 : 1$ in the United Kingdom. Promotion is difficult because most of the top places were filled by the party nominees or by the old hands. Consequently, the government did not attract the most suitable type of official—it had to take what it could get. The result has been appalling. The underpaid official often finishes his hard day's work and starts another job in the late afternoon to enable him to make ends meet. He has no time to study to make up for his inexperience, and no time to cultivate the graces that make for tradition in government service.

With the decline of moral standards, temptation has also come to some—though not many—officials in key position. One favors another, why should others make all the easy money, and so on down the slippery slope. The public knows all this, talks about it—often in lurid exaggeration. Rumor and telltale add their quota. The result is the gulf between rulers and ruled. The people speak of the government and its departments as "they"; they no longer identify themselves with the government.

It is this cleavage which makes it so difficult to effectively take measures to meet the economic crisis. The distrust is so great, the attitude of *saute qui peut* so developed, that it is virtually impossible to tackle the problem of incentives and to induce greater output.

My former friend was vivid and severe in emphasizing the issue:

"When I returned home," he said, "I told my friends that we seem to lack the ambition to work harder and to create much more. We do not impose the yoke of compulsion as do the Russians because we affect the symbols of democracy. We are not in a

position to offer the baits which the Americans can offer their workers. So time may cure us, and I am not bargaining about the cost of the cure."

BUT for the moment labor and industry are entrenched in a firm position, protected by the political balance of power which the system of proportional representation has created. This has given Israel a stable government and a rigidly organized economy and government service at a time when a certain amount of instability might be more healthy. It has given Israel a government so weighed down with checks and balances that it can hardly move, and a coalition without common purpose intent principally on defending what each party holds.

The frustration arising from such a coalition has not only weakened the government but also its several parts. The socialist *élan* of Mapai, the labor party, has suffered from its preoccupation with power and from its inability to pursue a socialist policy in harness with anti-socialist coalition partners. The religious parties have probably done themselves incalculable harm by forcing religious observance on the country, not by persuasion but by the exploitation of their electoral position, and the *Kulturkampf* which might have been postponed for a generation has come appreciably nearer.

But most serious of all, when one considers the future, is the product that has been compounded of coalition government, political nepotism, and the lack of inducement to enter the government service: namely that crust of mediocrity in the governing organs of the nation—in the government, in the government departments, in the party leaderships, in the Jewish Agency, and in the Knesset. There are exceptions, of course, but they do not change the general condition.

This crust of mediocrity lies heavily on the nation; it stifles political life, economic daring, business incentive, and the increased productivity of labor. Above all else it prevents effective action to deal with the economic emergency and with the moral crisis. It also has had the effect of stultifying the

successor generation. One looks in vain among the younger generation at the university, in the press, and in political life for the successors to the present leadership. In some ways the younger Palestine-born generation—the sabra—suffers now for the one-sidedness of its educational upbringing during the period of struggle against the Mandatory power. As the sabra comes into contact with the realities of running a country and as he comes into closer contact with foreign countries, his self-assurance is assailed by doubts and uncertainties. Many have lost faith in their old values and they have not yet found new ones attuned to the new conditions of an independent state with all its difficulties and shortcomings. This can be seen at the university in Jerusalem and in the settlements throughout the country, where many of the younger men have become cynical, others have become interested only in personal acquisition and many, as a form of escapism, are concentrating their attention on international politics almost to the virtual exclusion of the immediate problems. This is the case of many members of Mapam and of a group of intellectuals attached to the Hebrew University who prefer to discuss ways to promote a "Third Force" world ideology rather than come to grips with their problems nearer home.

This then is the case against Israel's governing hierarchy: it embraces the whole complex network of government, administration, parties, the Knesset, the Jewish Agency—they are all included in the popular indictment. What then is the case for the government?

AN OXFORD professor once described Israel as the first pre-fabricated state. But there was no pre-fabricated machinery to run it. Figures bear eloquent witness to the nature of this problem.

At the last Knesset elections some 700,000 adult men and women exercised their right to vote; but of these, classical Zionists—that is, Zionist pioneers in Israel as against Israeli nationalists or simply citizens of Israel or Jews in Israel—made up no more than 50,000.

Just as during the actual period of fighting in 1948 a small elite—a few thousands, probably not more than 5 per cent of the total adult population—in fact secured the state, so now the attempt to consolidate the State of Israel is conducted largely by proxy. A hard-pressed government, staffed largely by the old Zionist core, is attempting to create a state for world Jewry and for the hundreds of thousands who have come in the last few years.

The Jews outside give generously; they visit Israel; some give their advice; they help Israel in a great many ways; but they do not become an integral part of it. Israel needs urgently 25,000 trained professional workers and administrators; she will be lucky if she gets 2,500 over the next two or three years from the Western world. The inexperienced, untrained, and unprofessional improvisers in the country must therefore step into the breach.

Nor has their problem been made any easier by the character of the "ingathered exiles." A great many of these have come to Israel not to pioneer but to relax from the perils of their past; they have come home and they want their reward. Many have initiative and enterprise and they make the most of these characteristics which helped them in the past to survive. They do not make for an administrator's paradise. They are interested only in picking the fruits of Zionism; they are less concerned with the tree.

And then there are those who have lived in Palestine for many years—and lived relatively well. Now that they have become part of the new nation and the glamor has worn off, they are again primarily concerned to insure their living and their living standards; if government regulations stand in their way, they will find means to get around them. This applies not only to business people but also to officials of powerful institutions, or to members of privileged monopolies, such as some of the transport cooperatives.

All this, then, has tended to swamp the Zionist minority. The six thousand young men who did not return from the battle-

fields of 1948—their absence is now painfully felt. Europe's Zionist Jews; they too were decimated—they and the Palestine casualties form a missing generation of Zionists.

The arguments adduced in support of the government, as well as those which are charged against it, only compound the gravity of Ben Gurion's crisis.

THE weak coalition government ties the hands of a naturally decisive and aggressive Prime Minister in dealing with all other problems—even the economic ones. Ben Gurion was clearly conscious of this when he discussed recently the desirability of electoral reform with each of the party representatives. The system of proportional representation bequeathed to Israel by the United Nations Assembly puts a premium on small parties and splinter groups, and makes certain that government only by coalition is possible. Ben Gurion sounded the parties as to their willingness to switch to the British electoral system with possibly some slight variations. The consequences of such a change could be forecast with some certainty. It would lead to the return in the first instance of Ben Gurion's Mapai with a clear majority in the Knesset, and the General Zionists as the largest opposition party. It would probably wipe out altogether most of the smaller parties and reduce the representation of Mapam and Herut.

There is no question that Ben Gurion and Mapai would be the chief beneficiaries of an electoral reform, and, presumably because of this, every party leader of every party with whom Ben Gurion negotiated turned down the proposal out of hand. The question whether at the present juncture the imperative need of the state—as distinct from the parties—was for a strong democratic government apparently played no part in their decision.

Mapai has of course largely itself to blame if the prospect of its unhampered rule is not greeted by unqualified joy. Mapai, Ben Gurion's own party, is in some ways also his biggest worry. The party, through the General Labor Federation, the Histadrut,

which it dominates, has become far more powerful in the life of the country than it is in the Knesset. The opponents of Mapai point to this power as one of the chief causes of Israel's tribulation, but that is an oversimplification. With all its faults—and they are neither few nor negligible—Mapai remains the hard core of the country. Its achievements and its contribution to the making of Israel are unquestionable.

But there is a problem which springs from this strength, and the way in which it has been used. There is, again and foremost, the charge of nepotism or political patronage which Mapai has unashamedly practiced to staff key posts in government, industry, and economy with its loyal party members or partisans. As a result, many offices have been filled with the equivalent of inexperienced but loyal party hacks while trained experts have been passed over. The practice runs like a red thread right through the country's life. It has caused much bitterness and cynicism, and considerable inefficiency.

Mapai, in answer, makes no virtue of its practice but claims political necessity in the interests of the state. It derides those who would prefer to practice liberal selection and see the power of labor undermined. That in Mapai's view would do more to undermine the fundamental strength of Israel than any amount of inefficiency and favoritism.

Having thus established an adequate reason for its current practice—which at least has convinced most of its supporters—Mapai and the Histadrut have continued to pursue their path without much regard for others—or for the national consequences. One result is that some of the great organizations built up by the labor movement and some of the cooperatives, which in the past were popular heroes and showpieces for all visitors to see, are now anathema to the general public, particularly some of the transport cooperatives which virtually control all public transport. The cost of transportation has increased enormously, the service has materially declined, and altogether the relationship of the cooperative to the public has become distinctly bad. The same is true in varying

degree with such organizations as Tnuva, the cooperative dairy shops, Solel Boneh, the mammoth contractors, and a good many others.

Somehow Ben Gurion has to manage to base his policies on the support of Mapai—without, however, subscribing to all the policies of his own party. He finds it necessary to press increasingly for policies which may offend the Mapai sectional interest—such measures, for example, as control of the cost-of-living bonus, the proposed wage-freeze, and a host of others. Thus, he must manage to master his own supporters before he can embark on his hoped-for strong government based on a majority party.

FACED with a threatening deadlock in his effort to tackle the root of the problem, Ben Gurion changed his tactics and returned to his own tried method. He had found in recent years that the only way he could achieve drastic results was to take over himself. He took over the army in 1948 and turned it from a partisan force with a variety of commands into a disciplined organization; as his defense lieutenant he picked Levi Eshkol, and as his chief agent in the provision of arms in Europe he chose Ehud Avriel, who was then in Prague.

Later, when "development" became the chief preoccupation, Eshkol was made Minister of Agriculture and Development and Avriel was brought home to become the Director-General of the Prime Minister's office in charge of the allocation of the American grant-in-aid. And now, faced by this latest and gravest crisis, Ben Gurion has overcome his lack of interest in and distaste for economics, and has made his lieutenant Eshkol Minister of Finance; his other aide, Avriel, he sent with Eshkol to the Treasury as Director-General. He thus signaled not any really new economic policy, but his recognition that for the moment administration has become more important than policy, and that only by sound administration can the government regain its moral standing in the country.

But for Ben Gurion this is clearly only

an incidental side issue in the much larger drama that he is helping to unfold. Perhaps, like Moses, he sees the solution only with the next generation that has been born free and uninhibited by the slave mentality of the Jews who came out of bondage. One senses this larger scene in his room in the Prime Minister's office: the large map from Casablanca to Pakistan showing in rose-tinted coloring the vast Moslem sea that surrounds the little green spot in the center that is Israel. That clearly is his perspective and his preoccupation—the challenge of the emergent Arab in a generation, or perhaps two. Can Israel meet that challenge by developing within her narrow confines a technical ability and a productive capacity equal to that of the best in the world? It is a vision that compensates for much of the present shortcomings, but it does not solve them. It adds also one further aspect to Ben Gurion's crisis: his sights are raised so high that he often does not notice how many toes he treads on in his progress.

He carefully avoids only one toe—that of the army. And no consideration of present-day Israel is complete without a brief appreciation of its present role. It has remained surprisingly isolated from the decline of moral standards; it has been deliberately kept away from any possible contagion. Discipline has been strict, the administration unbending to the point of harshness. But the army has never been accused of either favoritism or nepotism. It intervened effectively last winter

to save the immigrants from flooded camps and the administrative chaos that followed. But its commander, General Yigal Yadin, has turned firmly against all proposals for further army intervention in the affairs of the state. There have been not a few voices among the younger officers urging that the army should take over and introduce order into the administrative chaos of the civilians, that it should supervise the distribution of rations, and generally make up for the deficiencies of party government. But Yadin has not only rejected, he also denounced all such propositions as the short cut to Levantinism, and the destruction of all hope of a democratic society in Israel.

THIS then is Ben Gurion's crisis in its many variations. It is not something which a miraculous restoration of the balance of payments alone can cure, or which can be explained away facilely by reference to the novelty and brevity of the state's existence. The Jews are an experienced people; it is now to be seen whether they can create the prerequisites of a free state.

Israel, after all, is the test by which Jews the world over will be judged, and it is in Israel that the decision will fall whether Jews will be respected or otherwise. Ben Gurion's crisis is therefore also the crisis of every Jew, whether he likes it or not, whether he wants it or not. "For they were born into the world," Thucydides wrote, "to take no rest themselves and to give none to others."